

AMBLESIDE:

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L' U M I L E P I A N T A.

FOR THE CHILDREN'S SAKE.

*The House of Education,
Ambleside.*

MY DEAR BAIENS,

I am again invited to say something to you, and I have you so much in my thoughts that this is an easy task. I constantly hear pleasant things about your teaching: your pupils, I am sometimes told, find their lessons "absolutely delightful": the children say the time flies and each new lesson is a new pleasure. Now, it sometimes happens that after a term of this happy intercourse between teacher and pupils the examination paper comes and causes a little depression of spirits to both. The knowledge that has been acquired with delight is not forthcoming when it is wanted, and the teacher loses heart and thinks that her term's work has been a failure. This occurs only sometimes: in most cases your examination results are exceptionally good. Even when this is not the case do not allow yourselves or your pupils to be depressed with a sense of failure: believe me, it is a better thing to have had the children in love with knowledge for its own sake throughout the term than to have them produce the good papers which can easily be obtained by a little "cramming." Love of knowledge is a better thing than the small share of it which we can acquire, and it is better that you should rouse in your children a healthy appetite for science, literature, nature, art, than that you should furnish them ever so well with facts to be produced at examinations. I say this to cheer any of you who, after a term of very faithful labour, find that your pupils produce but little in

answer to the questions set. At the same time you remember our old axiom, "the mind can know nothing but what it can produce in the form of an answer to a question," and there is certainly some fault in the teaching when the children are not able to reproduce what they have learnt. I know that your honest horror of "cramming" places you at a disadvantage, but there is a right as well as a wrong way of securing our mental property; it is there we know, any picture or idea received with avidity is a possession for ever, it cannot be lost; but the difficulty is that the owner of the piece of mental property is unable to recover it at will; some chance circumstance may bring it to light at an unexpected moment after having lain buried for years, but that is not by any means so useful as if the said piece of knowledge could be produced when it is wanted—in answer to a question, for example. A bucket in a well is very useful *if* you can draw up, but if there is no chain, why, you are just as badly off, so far as getting water goes, as if there were no bucket at all. It is the links of the chain that the eager enthusiastic teacher very often forgets to join.

When disappointing papers reach me I often see reason to think that the teacher has rested satisfied in the consciousness that her pupils have thoroughly enjoyed a given lesson, and have so taken it in that it is their own for ever; she is content with a slight recapitulation at the time, but when the next lesson on the same subject arrives she takes the children's knowledge of the last steps for granted and goes on from where she left off. Again, another successful lesson which goes on until almost the last minute allowed on the time table: no time is left for recapitulation, but then it does not matter because the children are so interested and they really know it. Another and another such lesson follow suit, and now comes an uneasy sense of shaky foundations, of gaps in the children's knowledge, of a fact lost here, and an idea not fully grasped there, and then the poor teacher sits in severe judgment upon herself and says "its all my fault, I suppose I did not teach this point or that thoroughly." Meanwhile she is a depressing and uncomfortable person to be with, and communicates to the children a sense of failure and wrong-doing which they do not in the least deserve to have. All this may be avoided by the simple process of rivetting each link by recapitulation; never be tempted to go on

so long with the new work of a given lesson that there is no time to go over it: never begin a new lesson without ascertaining that the last has been thoroughly mastered step by step. If we absolutely and always and from the first secure the *last* lesson, I think we may be tolerably at ease about the whole series, as each last lesson is linked to the one before it and brings it to the surface in answer to a mental pull more or less vigorous. The power of producing what one knows is to be had only at the cost of thorough, careful, varied, interesting recapitulation.

I should like to call your attention to one more point: when your programmes arrive do not go to work vaguely, doing as much as you can each day; let your first task be to divide the work for the term in each subject into so many pages, for example, to be done at each lesson, and see that that quantity is accomplished during the lesson. The sum is very easy, so many pages to be divided by so many lessons, giving three or four it may be to each lesson. This will save you from much desultory work, much rambling talk, and the disappointing sense that you have more to accomplish than you can possibly get through.

It is a pleasure to me to hear of good teaching, but always a far deeper joy to know as I do that you place the moral training of the children on a higher level than their intellectual attainments, and that you ceaselessly endeavour after some better habit of thought and act, some nobler ideal of life in your pupils.

I will say nothing about your subject for discussion in this number except that I look forward with deep interest to your papers: every effort of yours is a cause of joy to me.

Your always loving friend,

C. M. MASON.